

# A FAMILIAR FACE IN OFFICE

*Learning from past experiences, Jim Folsom Jr. hopes to facilitate a working relationship between Democrats and Republicans in the Senate, as he takes the position of lieutenant governor.*

**BY LORI PICKETT  
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PHOTOS BY  
CAROLINE BAIRD SUMMERS**

Size must not matter to the majority of Alabamians who chose Democrat “Little Jim” Folsom over Republican “Big Luther” Strange to be lieutenant governor on November 7.

Folsom has been in this position before in 1986 and 1990. It’s been about 12 years, but he says he does have the experience and training for the job. During his absence from politics, he enjoyed private life, and worked in the investment banking business where he was involved with everything from finance and business to debt structure and budgets, all of which he says will be helpful skills for him as lieutenant governor.

“I gained perspective about all of those things,” he says. “I’ve dealt with a lot of different financial issues all over the country, and will bring something to the table with that knowledge.”

Some might wonder why Folsom decided to return to politics by running for lieutenant governor. He says it was a difficult decision, but several people encouraged him to run in the latter part of 2005. Some were previous supporters and some were new, but they all felt the state needed someone to provide leadership, bring back stability and build coalitions in the Senate, which has been a contentious body over the last several years, he says.

“The more I thought about it, the more I thought I could do some good in that capacity once again,” he says.



Lieutenant Governor-elect  
Jim Folsom Jr.

## STARTING AN AUTOMOTIVE LEGACY WITH MERCEDES

Few would argue that Folsom did “do some good” as lieutenant governor, but some have questioned ethical and moral issues he was involved with. He says despite any mistakes he may have made in the past, it will not affect his ability to serve as lieutenant governor in the present.

“I have matured quite a bit in

the private sector for 12 years and learned a lot through that,” he says. “I think the people of Alabama know that I did a lot of good while I was in office, like with Mercedes, pre-paid college tuition and effectively providing leadership for the state’s Senate,” he says. “People voted for an independent lieutenant governor who would get the job done.”

Folsom was in office when the state was recruiting the Mercedes-

Benz plant to the state, which has since spurred the entrance of several other automobile manufacturers. "We have acquired the name 'Detroit of the South' because the automobile industry has developed here over the last 13 years," he says. "It's been absolutely phenomenal growth."

In order to keep up with that kind of development, Folsom thinks Alabamians need to be proud of the new title and build upon it. "It's sort of like having a great winning football tradition that you continue to build on and support."

He says to ensure that the state has the labor force needed and to attract new companies, Alabama should continue emphasizing education through technical training, especially in the automotive sector. "Education has always been, still is today and will continue to be a major issue for the state because that is our future." Areas like school funding, classroom and teacher standards and adequately paid teachers are among his concerns. He notes that because of the lower pay in Alabama, many teachers educated here are leaving for Georgia, where they can make more money.

## **TRANSPORTATION KEY TO BLACK BELT DEVELOPMENT**

Folsom says he also sees the need to start planning for ways to improve the more impoverished areas of the state, like the Black Belt. He says he would like to address the problems of the area by constructing a highway in West Alabama, from the Shoals area down to Mobile.

"From my viewpoint, until we have a major highway there, we're really not going to be able to develop West Alabama to reach its full potential." He says it's a long-term project that will take several years to complete. "That's the way to do it, and it's a good time to kick it off."

Alternative fuels are another issue Folsom says he is interested in. "I think it's going to be a big part of America's future, and Alabama needs to be active with a long-range plan."

Immigration is one of the biggest national issues the country is facing, Folsom says, and Alabama needs to figure out how to deal with it on a localized level. He says the responsibility lies with federal and state government to take action at the border. "We need to take a look at

realistic ways of identifying illegal immigrants without overreacting to the problem," he says. It will take time to fix, but he does recognize the problem has gotten to the point that it will cause an increasing burden on social systems.

## **PROPONENT OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM**

One issue specific to Alabama is constitutional reform. "I am a supporter, and I will continue to support it, as I always have," Folsom says. Alabama's constitution is one

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of the most amended in the country, and Folsom says it is not appropriate for today's Alabama. He says he is in the minority, since most people campaign for a total rewrite of the constitution because they don't trust that a true constitutional reform by convention will work.

Part of the problem, according to Folsom, is that it's only an issue among people who are aware of the problem. "It's an issue in colleges and universities, to academics and in the journalism community, but until it becomes an issue in barbershops and beauty shops, it's hard to get the ball rolling," he says.

As Folsom prepares to start work as lieutenant governor, there will be issues to deal with. Because he will keep his job managing government bond issues, conflicts of interest could arise, which he says he is aware of. "I have stated that I will not, absolutely will not be involved in any state-related bond issue," he says. "That is completely off the table." He points out that much of his work is done

outside Alabama with longstanding clients, which should pose no conflict.

## **EMBRACING THE ROLE OF FACILITATOR**

Every four years the Senate goes through a reorganization process as one body. Immediately after the election, Folsom met with several groups and caucuses to hear concerns and goals to figure out how things will work and build coalitions with willing and capable leaders. He cites his role as a facilitator to find a resolution to the organization questions.

Since the Democrats are the majority party, there is a chance that the Senate will vote to give Democrat Folsom more authority, since much of the office's power was lost in the late 1990s. He will preside over the Alabama Senate and be responsible for convening the body into session and preserving order. He also will play a role in the appointment of Senate standing committees, the assignment of bills to those committees and in the appointment of citizens to boards, commissions and authorities. "The lieutenant governor still has the gavel, and is the presiding officer of the Senate." Folsom says ultimately, legislators will decide how much influence he can have.

"Much of that is very fluid and doesn't have to be spelled out strictly," he says. Power also will be determined by how well Folsom works with the Senate — Democrats and Republicans alike. Folsom says he already has relationships with many senators, and has worked well with them in the past. "I think I can work well with them in the future."

He says it's important to put partisan feelings behind in order to have a healthy Legislature. Although Governor Bob Riley is a Republican, Folsom says he intends to give his 2010 plan fair consideration. "I see it as my duty to give those proposals a fair hearing."

After being the newly elected lieutenant governor for only a short time, Folsom says he has no plans to run for governor in four years. He says it's far from his mind right now. However, he couldn't answer the question without saying, "never say never."•

*Lori Pickett Culpepper is a staff writer for Business Alabama.*